

Euan Blair and the case for GCSE reform

Sir, Euan Blair is right to draw attention to the need to rethink assessment in schools ("Abolish flawed GCSEs, says Blair's son", news, May 11). Any thorough consideration of the issue is likely to conclude that GCSEs have served their time, but the tendency to pitch apprenticeships in opposition to university is not helpful. The economy needs recruitment to both sectors to be higher and qualifications need to be fit for both routes, otherwise we go back to separating children too early.

We do need to move away from thinking that only academic achievement matters but not just because we need more apprentices; knowing how to apply learning, share knowledge, practise skills as well as learning facts should be central to a 21st-century education. Working out how we the record and assess this needs a change in attitude from the government and awarding bodies but many schools are already taking the lead with some bold and imaginative ideas. We have the opportunity to make assessment the servant of imaginative teaching and learning; for too long, it has been a barrier.

Baroness Morris of Yardley
Education secretary 1991-92

Sir, The assertions by Euan Blair and Sir James Dyson on GCSEs underline that it is high time to look afresh at 16+ qualifications in the UK ("Dyson calls for pupils to learn from failure", May 11). We live in an age of fluidity and interdisciplinarity in which, according to the World Economic Forum, the shelf life for professional skills is severely compromised. Employers increasingly tell us that the most critical attributes are creativity, problem-solving and resilience: in short, the practical and emotional capabilities to embrace the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world, with a positive and empowered mindset.

Existing assessments, which are based on early specialisation and 19th-century constructs, are outdated in their insistence on parochial subject boundaries and skillsets. It surely is now time, after the pandemic, to explore afresh the possibilities for hybrid qualifications that promote interdisciplinary learning, encourage exploratory and adventurous thinking, and which nurture the agility and flexibility required in the modern workplace.

Jane Lunnon
Head, Alleyn's School, London SE22

Sir, Euan Blair is right that we can and should do much better than our existing deeply flawed exam system. The Rethinking Assessment coalition has brought together state and independent schools, universities, colleges and academics, employers, parents and students all with the aim of recognising the strengths of every young person. After 11 years of schooling students are given a set of numbers as the sum total of what they have achieved, and for a third of students those numbers indicate that they have failed.

Surely young people should leave school with a profile of what they can do (head, heart and hand) and what they are like as a learner. That is what employers are looking for and that is what matters in life.

Peter Hyman
Co-director, Big Education Trust;
co-founder, Rethinking Assessment

Sir, Given that many parents, such as me, have children that have already started their exams I feel the timing of your report to be ill judged. There is some merit in what is said in the article but there is a time and a place.

Simon Park
Caterham, Surrey